

THE MERCY OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER

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ACUTELY AWARE aware of the extent of global anguish marking the 'signs of the times' of the twenty-first century, Pope Francis has proclaimed that an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* will offer the world a pastoral response to its grief in so far as:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his/her brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and humanity, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.¹

The *Jubilee of Mercy* will begin on December 8th 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of Vatican Council II. The year of Mercy will conclude on the feast of Christ the King on November 20th 2016.

The date chosen for commencing this Jubilee testifies to God's abundant mercy in preparing Mary for her motherhood of the Word incarnate by virtue of her perfect redemption through preservation from 'original sin'. The closing celebration will include the Church's 'new' dedication of humanity and the whole cosmos to Christ's Lordship as universal Saviour. It will embody a pledge that in Christ, the visible 'face of the Father's mercy', justice will be seen to prevail amongst all nations.²

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The 'thread' of Mercy

The Jubilee will continue a 'thread' commenced when in opening Vatican Council II, Pope John XXIII indicated that 'Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity' and should 'show herself a loving mother to all; patient kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children.'³

The 'thread' was taken up by Pope Paul VI whose closing speech at the Council emphasised how the model of Council's spirituality had been derived from the charity and mercy of the Good Samaritan.⁴ P. Paul VI is remembered as being the first to formulate the idea of the modern Church's creation of a 'culture of love'.

Pope John Paul II's personal experiences of the horrors of war, death camps and totalitarianism led to the 1980 encyclical, *Dives in Misericordiae (Rich in Mercy)* dedicated to the theme of the power of Mercy for healing endangered human beings. His canonisation of Sr. Faustina Kowalska has instigated worldwide promotion of her message of Divine Mercy as 'Easter's secret' and now celebrated on the first Sunday of Eastertide.

Pope Benedict XVI extended the 'thread' of Mercy in his 2006 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, and again in 2009 with *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)* in which the Church's concern for Mercy was considered within the broad context of social justice.

Pope Francis' first exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* developed Pope Benedict's vision of the 'new evangelisation' within the context of Mercy:

'The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel' (*E.G.* §114). In an interview shortly after his election, Pope Francis called upon Church leaders to be 'ministers of mercy above all' in evincing nearness and proximity in order to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful within a Church recognised as mother and shepherdess.⁵

Mercy: Biblical Aspects

Features of 'the face of the Father's mercy' are revealed throughout the Old Testament. English translations often mask the meaning of Hebrew terms affirming the depths YHWH's⁶ ever active relationship with the community of Israel: *chesed* may express God's mercy, loving kindness, compassion and steadfast love; derivatives of *rechem* express divine 'womb love'; *tsedaqah* and *emet* suggest righteousness, divine loyalty and faithfulness; *mishpat* indicates justice.⁷

Modern scholarship points to a three-fold revelation of the dynamic revelation of divine Mercy.⁸ The first is God's abiding Presence (Exodus 6:7)⁹ intimated in the revelation of the divine name to Moses, 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14) and more fully disclosed in the Covenant on Sinai (Ex.20:1-21). The second revelation is made when Moses intercedes for a stiff-necked people (Ex. 33:19) and the God of absolute sovereignty and irreducible freedom, promises mercy (*rachamin*) in giving the people a second chance to respect the Covenant. In the third instance, Moses encounters the divine presence in the midst of impenetrable cloud. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: '*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...*' (Ex. 34:6)

Throughout centuries of national crises in Israel, prophets arose time and time again to remind God's people of the promises and social obligations of the Covenant.



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It has been well said that 'Mercy is God's creative and fertile justice.'¹⁰ Prophetic warnings about the 'wrath' of God are frequently cited to suggest that YHWH was an angry God of vengeance. Such a theology is totally misguided. Old Testament 'wrath' is a way of expressing divine holiness which, of its very nature, asserts God's resistance to sin and evil. In prophetic terms, whenever divine 'wrath' is appeased, God's mercy offers yet another chance of forgiveness for infidelity; it betokens hope for a future of peace and messianic blessing:

*For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion
on you.... (Isaiah 54:7-8)¹¹*

Both prophetic writings and the psalms of the Old Testament include poignant expressions of lamentation and repentance for Israel's wanton infidelity to the Covenant. On the one hand, the genre of lamentation complains of divine abandonment and struggles to discover a merciful God in the midst of national distress (Is 34: 1-17). On the other hand, the mood of the great lamentations moves from despair to hope (Is. 51-57).¹²

The enigmatic figure of the Isaiah's Suffering Servant Songs¹³ recalled every year in the Church's Liturgy of Good Friday, carries forward a theology that YHWH enters mercifully into the suffering of the people. In keeping with this theological sense of divine omnipotence, the Church's patristic tradition

is distinct from a later scholastic metaphysical understanding of God as a-pathetic and incapable of suffering.¹⁴

New Testament scriptures reveal that in Jesus the Christ, risen and glorified, *'the Word has become flesh and lived among us'* (Jn. 1:14). The synoptic Gospels attributed to Mark, Matthew and Luke abound with narratives of the outreach of Jesus' mercy to those who suffer from all kinds of physical disability ('demons', epilepsy, leprosy, lameness, deafness, muteness and blindness), from hunger and homelessness and from mourning and grief. Jesus' mercy stretches beyond cultural taboos, in restoring life and health to a pubescent girl and a menopausal woman (Lk. 8: 40-55), in being an indiscriminate host (Lk. 14:1-12) and in his wise interpretation of Sabbath law (Mk. 2: 23-28; Mt 12:1-8).

English translations mask the fact of there being two distinct meanings regarding Jesus' ministry of mercy. On occasions when Jesus' healing is requested, as when the blind Bartimaeus shouted, *'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!'* (Mk. 10:47), the Greek verb used is *eleo*.¹⁵ However, the verb used for Jesus' action in response for 'pity' is *splagchnizomai*, implying very graphically, 'to be heaved in one's bowels'. Such was Jesus' response to the bereaved widow of Nain: *'When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'* (Lk 7: 13).

Ancient Greek culture considered the bowels to be the seat of human passions. Thus Jesus' bestowal of mercy was, and always will be a profound visceral outpouring of steadfast love.

Gospel parables integrate a love-mercy-justice continuum explicitly developed in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and reiterated by Jesus when questioned about 'the greatest commandment' (Mt. 22:34-40): *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*

Central to the Gospel of John is the evangelist's theology of 'the hour' of Jesus.¹⁶ As foretold in the Zechariah's prophetic image of Israel's *'mourning for the pierced one'* with the promise that *'On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem...'*,¹⁷ 'the hour' of Jesus reveals a perception of Mercy as an outpouring of divine love from the pierced heart of the Saviour.¹⁸

The Church, Sacrament of Mercy

The flow of blood and water streaming from the side of Jesus on Calvary has become symbolic of the origin and growth of the Church.¹⁹ While every ecclesial sacrament is a source of divine grace and mercy, we focus here on the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist. However, we note Pope Francis' hope that the Jubilee year will encourage the Faithful to return to frequent practice of sacramental Reconciliation in order to experience the grandeur of God's mercy as a source of true interior peace.²⁰

Ancient portrayals of the Church as 'Mother' and the baptismal bath as the 'womb' of Mother Church, have received fresh emphases following the renewed rites of Baptism and Eucharist in the wake of Vatican Council II. We remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being born 'of water and the Spirit' (Jn. 3:5); we recall also St Augustine's interpretation of Jesus' pierced heart as 'The door to life... from which the sacraments of the Church flowed and without which one cannot attain the life that is true living.'²¹

Australian Church architecture frequently fails to convey adequately how baptismal 'mercy' themes of sacramental birth, death, resurrection and incorporation into the mystical Body of Christ, are ritualised. Nevertheless, many churches do now provide opportunity either for baptismal immersion or have situated the baptismal font with 'living' water at the church's entrance to allow the Faithful symbolic 'passage' from the 'womb/

tomb' to the table of Eucharist.

The sacrament of Eucharist is 'the source and summit' of Christian life.²² All the other sacraments are oriented to Eucharist for here is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, the 'Real Presence' of Christ. How sublimely has this mystery been handed down by St Thomas Aquinas: 'O sacred banquet in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, our souls are filled with grace and a pledge of our future glory is given to us.'²³

Inclusion of a double *epiclesis* (invocation of the Holy Spirit) within the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass emphasises how the sacramental Body of Christ on the altar must be considered in correlation with the mystical Body of Christ, the Church. With hands extended over the bread and wine, the priest prays the first *epiclesis*: 'You are indeed holy, O Lord, the font of all holiness. Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall,²⁴ so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The second *epiclesis* completes the first: 'Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we (*i.e.* the Church) may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.'

The Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass concludes with the 'Great Amen'. With one voice the community expresses joyful thanksgiving for God's Eucharistic presence allowing the Church to stand firmly in the 'space' of God's favour, fidelity and boundless mercy.²⁵

St. Augustine grasped the intrinsic relationship between the 'Great Amen' of the Eucharistic Prayer and the communicant's 'Amen':

If... you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful: 'You are the body of Christ and his members' (1 Cor. 12:27). If, therefore, you are the body of Christ and his members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table; you receive your mystery. You reply 'Amen' to that which you

are, and by replying, you consent. For you hear 'the Body of Christ', and you reply 'Amen'. Be then a member of the body of Christ so that your 'Amen' may be true.²⁶

The Church's Mission of Mercy

The final rite of every Eucharistic liturgy is a formal but brief *missa*: 'Go forth...' ²⁷ and be what you have become in the Eucharist—a 'face of Christ' to the world. In responding 'Thanks be to God', the community accepts its role of taking the Good News of Christ from 'in here' to 'out there'.

'Mission' indicates action on behalf of the entire Church—clergy, laity (of all ages) and consecrated religious. Works of Mercy are as diverse as feeding the 'hungry', giving drink to the 'thirsty', welcoming the 'stranger', clothing the 'naked' and visiting the 'sick' and the 'captive' (Mt. 25:34-40).²⁸ These symbolic categories immediately evoke images of countless human beings dying from malnutrition and safe drinking water, displaced persons seeking asylum, the homeless, victims of persecution, abuse, addiction and torture of mind and body. Each category calls equally for one's care for 'neighbour' close to home—family, friends, associates and our indigenous sisters and brothers.

'Mission' involves commitment to the 'new evangelisation' of preaching, teaching and witnessing to the Gospel in ways allowing the mercy of Christ to become part of the fabric of society today.²⁹ Its pastoral orientation invites those alienated from God or Church to discover God as graciously near, like the Father of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:1-24), or the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The 'new evangelisation' proclaims the deepest truth about God and about our own humanity.

'Mission' involves the Church's ongoing engagement with inter-faith and ecumenical dialogue in order to foster the 'dream' of Jesus that all people may be sanctified in the truth and that all who believe in his name may become '*completely one, so that the world may*

know that you [Father] have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (Jn. 17:21-23)

Christian Spirituality and Mercy

The meaning of 'spirituality' is bandied about in all manner of secular ways today. As Christians, we understand it as 'Spirit-uality', as that 'life in the Spirit' so exquisitely described by St Paul in Chapter 8 of the Epistle to the Romans. There we find his magnificent hymn-like acclamation of God's love for us and our call to live according to the Spirit of Christ who dwells within us (Rom. 8:3-11). For Paul our minds, our bodies, emotions and daily activities are 'spiritual' if they share in our service of God in and by the Holy Spirit. 'Mercy' may therefore be recognised as a sub-text of Paul's 'Fruit of the Spirit'³⁰: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 8: 22-24).

For many centuries veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus has influenced the Church's expression of 'Mercy' spirituality.³¹ In our age of religious scepticism, the 'doubting' Thomas's encounter with the heart-wound of the Risen Christ (Jn. 20:24-29) offers reassurance of the possibility of faith in the midst of the world's denial of what lies beyond physical discovery. The Eucharistic liturgy and the Divine Office for the feast of the

Sacred Heart of Jesus demonstrate how divine Love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus contains a strong strand of 'lamentation' or 'godly sorrow' as the Church acknowledges Jesus' words on his way to Calvary: *Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children... for if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?* (Lk. 23:28-31.)³²

In promulgating the *Jubilee of Mercy*, Pope Francis' thoughts turn to Mary as Mother of Mercy:

May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love.³³

This response to Pope Francis' Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy has been an attempt to emphasise that 'mercy' must be understood as a verb! Let us pray with Pope Francis that the Church may become the voice of every man and woman, and repeat confidently without end: 'Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been of old'. (Ps 25.6

NOTES

1. *Misericordiae Vultus (MV)* §2 (Strathfield NSW: St Paul's Publ., 2015) 1-2.
2. *MV* §§ 1, 8.
3. *MV* §4 cf. Opening address of Vatican Council II, October 11, 1962.
4. *MV* §4 cf. Closing speech Public Session, December 7, 1965.
5. Cited in Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014) 8.
6. To note: In deference to the use of the Divine Name, the new Revised Standard Version of the

Bible translates YHWH as 'Lord; & thereby uses the masculine pronoun.

7. Mark O'Brien OP, *A God Merciful and Gracious: Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament* (Alexandria NSW: Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2008) 6-11.

8. Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013) 46-49.

9. Kasper, *Mercy*, note III:16, p.231: 'God's being is Being-for-his-People: God's being as Pro-Existence is the wonderful mystery of his